Introduction
A faculty team studied the experiences and career outcomes of graduates of the master of science in merchandising GP-IDEA program. Working together on this initiative enhanced their understanding of the benefits and challenges of offering a successful on-line program. Results of the study will be used to make changes in curriculum and delivery of courses. Findings will also be useful in marketing the program and answering questions of prospective students who inquire about the benefits of the program for career advancement.

Purpose of the Study
To investigate students educational and career outcomes experienced by graduates who have completed Master of Science in Merchandising program.

Specific research objectives include accessing online students experience along six dimensions:
• Program quality
• Program structure/content
• Student-Instructor interactions
• Benefits of the program
• Applicability to professional life
• Expectations of the program

Educational and Career Outcomes Experienced by Master of Science in Merchandising GP-IDEA Program Alumni
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“....this was one of the best things I’ve ever done!” (Interviewee .18)

Findings & Conclusion

Program Quality: Students characterized strengths of the online program as unique and relevant to the work world, with well-prepared and knowledgeable faculty. Especially appreciated the accommodations made for full-time career-oriented students. A weakness identified was related to questions regarding program requirements that may be alleviated with an orientation program.

Program structure/content: Students perceived benefits of the online program to be rapid access to information and diversity in teaching styles. However, some concerns regarding finding resources, accessing libraries, and little opportunity for face-to-face interaction were noted.

Student-Instructors’ interactions: Most respondents had great experiences with instructors and appreciated instructors professional preparation, fairness, availability, and teaching style.

Benefits of the program: Students generally noted the program aligned with personal and professional career goals. Specific benefits included: enhanced job opportunities, receiving salary increases, personal and professional development, as well as earning a degree. A few indicated no direct professional benefit currently, however expressed confidence there would be impact in the future.

Applicability to professional life: Students valued different perspectives represented and the interaction with individuals from diverse backgrounds; the relevance of diversity in preparing for success in a global industry was noted. Students reported gaining a better understanding of the broad and diverse scope of a merchandising career.

Expectations of the program: Nearly 86 percent of respondents indicated completion of the program allowed them to realize their expectations. Remaining students said expectations were not realized due to current workplace issues.

In conclusion, while students are interested in offering some suggestions for improving the program, overall they believe the program is strongly connected to industry practices, and the online environment is very accommodating.

Method
A multiple-case study technique was used to examine the impact of this program on the professional careers of the 42 students who have graduated from the program since it began in 2005.

A semi-structured interview guide of open-ended questions was developed. All graduates were contacted by e-mail. Telephone interviews were scheduled and conducted by research assistant. Graduates also completed an on-line survey to gather demographic information, employment status, skills gained, and program quality assessment. A total of 21 student responses were used for qualitative analysis.